

Great River Electronics MP2-NV

Not that well known as a brand in Europe but a well respected manufacturer in its native US, Great River is beginning to make in-roads on this side of the pond. **JON THORNTON** investigates a dual channel preamp that nods towards vintage designs and becomes strangely transfixed by the experience.



GREAT RIVER ELECTRONICS has been quietly producing low volume, high specification audio equipment for many years, although it might not be as well known in Europe yet as other marques. The Great River in question is the mighty Mississippi and is a nod in the direction of the company's headquarters in St Paul, Minnesota.

The MP2-NV (US\$2795) is a 2-channel microphone preamp, packaged in a 1U rackmount. Compact it might be, but lightweight it most certainly isn't — due to a combination of rugged casework, large internal PSU and a whole lot of additional iron courtesy of transformers on inputs and outputs. The 'NV' designation, one assumes, is due to the fact that the internals are based on the classic 1073 module. So in addition to all the ironmongery, you get Class-A, fully discrete circuitry throughout.

Starting at the business end (the rear panel), microphone level inputs and balanced line level outputs are on XLRs. Each channel also has an additional, unbalanced output on 1/4-inch jack, working at a nominal -10dBv , which is useful for monitoring purposes if the box is acting as a front end to a DAW. This output is also derived pre the output transformer, so if you are happy with a lower operating level and an unbalanced signal, it gives you another option in terms of sonic character. An unbalanced insert point on TRS jack for each channel completes the connectivity picture.

The front panel is similarly unsurprising in terms of features. Each channel has a stepped gain control (5dB steps from $+5$ to $+60$), which works in conjunction with a continuously variable output level control. A six-segment LED ladder meter is provided for each of these gain stages, which is nice to see, and allows a good degree of sonic control. Each channel has a front-panel switch for phantom power, output polarity reverse, input impedance loading

(300ohms or 1200ohms), and output loading. The last connects a 600-Ohm resistor across the output transformer's secondary to achieve the flattest frequency response when pushed in. If not switched in, this allows the output transformer's natural resonant peak (roughly $+6\text{dB}$ at 50kHz) to exert an effect on the overall tonality of the signal.

The loading, input impedance and polarity reverse function are all relay switched, and the stepped gain control feels sturdy and positive and virtually immune from crackle or noise. I mention this simply because it is an indication of the attention to detail given to ensuring the highest quality signal path throughout — there's been no skimping here. The final item on the front panel is the provision of a high impedance input, again on 1/4-inch jack. This provides a FET-based impedance buffer, which in turn drives the input transformer directly. This means that the input impedance switch also comes into play even with high impedance sources.

The MP2-NV was tested with a variety of microphones, capacitor and dynamic, on a range of instrumental sources. For comparison, a Universal Audio 610 was used. Initial tests were carried out with the loading switch in, and with the first gain stage doing the least work possible — in other words the secondary gain stage used to make up as much of the required output level as possible. This is the method suggested by Great River to achieve the most neutral sonic performance, although overall impressions of tone even in this configuration are that the sound is impressively solid, particularly in the low-mid range, when compared to the UA610. This is more obvious on some sources than others — most notably with acoustic guitar and a close-miked bass cabinet, and surprisingly less noticeable on vocals and drum overheads. To my ears, the Great River also always seemed to flatten out high frequency transients slightly in comparison — not in

a way that suggests a lack of detail necessarily, but almost like a very gentle HF compression.

Unloading the output transformer doesn't negate this effect, but seems to add a sense of 'air' around the high frequencies in a manner more reminiscent of an exciter than simply an HF shelf. At the same time the low-mids seem to get a touch less dense, although this could simply be that the mid range seems to possess a little more bite. Playing around with the input impedance was a little less satisfying. On capacitor microphones it just seemed to (unsurprisingly) give more gain, and made it easier to drive the first gain stage into clipping. With an SM57, lowering the input impedance seemed to open up the HF response a little, but at the expense of rolling off the low end much earlier.

The fun really starts, though, when you allow the initial gain stage to be driven a little harder, while attenuating overall level with the output level control. Doing this doesn't really change the overall characteristics of the preamp, it simply exaggerates them. That sense of low-mid crunch, of solidifying the sound, becomes progressively more pronounced. Overcook it, and things degrade fairly gracefully as the levels of harmonic distortion build, but at all times the Great River seems to maintain an openness to the extremes of the frequency range that doesn't seem to close down the sound.

As an aside, one thing that really impresses, no matter how you use it, is the terrific sense of control that the Great River imparts. And I don't mean control over tonality, but rather a sense of massive headroom — you never feel the need to baby-sit it in terms of watching signal levels, it just gets on and does the job. Which is just as well, as one of the few niggles about the unit is the lack of any calibration on the meters. And if we are into nit-picking, it would be nice on a unit of this calibre to have a balanced insert if you're going to have one at all.

Despite these observations, I'll come clean and say that I more than just liked this box. If we were playing Desert-Island Preamplifiers here, it would certainly be on my list. To be honest, if it came down to simply having one mic pre in my rack, it's already displaced some of my previous favourite contenders. ■

PROS

Terrific headroom; punchy but open sound; more transformers than you can shake a stick at; feels indestructible.

CONS

Lack of legending on meters; unbalanced insert point.

EXTRAS

Great River also makes single channel preamps and dual and single channel EQs. The MEQ-1NV combines the one channel preamp ME-1NV and the one channel equalizer EQ-1NV in a single rackmount.



Contact

GREAT RIVER ELECTRONICS, US:
Website: www.greatriverelectronics.com
UK, Unity Audio: +44 1440 785843